

US-South Korean war games inflame Asian tensions

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The annual joint US-South Korean military exercises known as Ulchi Freedom Guardian (UFG) began yesterday amid rising tensions in Asia fuelled by the American military build-up throughout the region. While nominally aimed against North Korea, the war games consolidate Washington's military alliance with Seoul as it makes preparations for conflict with China.

The military drills involve around 25,000 US military personnel, of which 2,500 will come from outside South Korea, operating alongside 75,000 South Korean troops. The US has 28,500 troops stationed permanently in South Korea and is currently restructuring its bases in the country as part of its broader reorganisation of American military forces in the Asia Pacific.

North Korea has responded with militarist threats to launch nuclear strikes on South Korea and the United States "if they show the slightest sign of aggression." Such reckless and inflammatory threats, which have nothing to do with defending the North Korean people, play directly into Washington's hands by providing a pretext for its own military expansion and provocations in the region.

The US-led UN Command Military Armistice Commission declared it had notified the North Korean army that the UFG exercises were "non-provocative." This attempt to portray the joint war games as defensive and benign is false. Over the past five years in particular, the Obama administration has repeatedly exploited exercises with South Korea to make a menacing show of force in North East Asia.

Last November, the US and South Korea formally adopted a new military strategy—Operational Plans 5015 (OPLAN 5015)—that is explicitly offensive in character. In a conflict with North Korea, US and South Korean forces would make pre-emptive strikes on key

targets, including nuclear facilities, and carry out "decapitation" raids to assassinate high-level officials, among them North Korean leader Kim Jong-un.

OPLAN 5015 provides the framework not only for the UFG war games, but also the Soaring Eagle exercises currently being carried out by the South Korean Air Force, involving some 60 military aircraft and 530 troops. According to the *Korea Times*, the air force is practising to "pre-emptively remove the North's ballistic missile threats by proactively blocking the missiles and their supply route."

The *Korea Times* also noted that South Korean officials "are paying keen attention to the possibility that Pyongyang would carry out military provocations" during or after the UFG exercises. In reality, the huge exercises, which are premised on war with North Korea, have always heightened tensions on the Korean Peninsula. During last year's drill, the US exploited the situation to station nuclear-capable B-2 stealth bombers at its bases on Guam in the western Pacific.

The current war games are particularly reckless because of growing signs of instability in Pyongyang. Seoul last week reported the defection of a high-level North Korean official—the number two in its embassy in London. Washington has deliberately sought to destabilise the North Korean regime by strangling its economy through punitive sanctions and isolating the country diplomatically.

The US is boosting its defence ties with South Korea as part of its "pivot to Asia" and war drive against China. Earlier this month the Obama administration approved the sale of military GPS systems to South Korea to improve the capability of its Korea GPS Guided Bomb. On August 14, the Yonhap news agency cited a top official in Seoul saying that South Korea would expand its ballistic missile arsenal to be able to

destroy all North Korean military installations simultaneously.

The most significant move, however, was the announcement last month that the US will station its Terminal High Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) system in South Korea as part of its anti-ballistic missile network in the western Pacific. THAAD, which can intercept and destroy ballistic missiles, is not aimed primarily against Pyongyang, but against Beijing. It is part of US preparations for nuclear war with China, which has objected to the THAAD deployment.

Relations between Seoul and Beijing have soured as South Korea has been increasingly integrated into US war plans. Chinese authorities joined their North Korean counterparts in condemning the US-South Korean war games. The state-owned Xinhua news agency criticised US “muscle-flexing,” warning it would “lead to a vicious circle of violence for violence” that could provoke fighting.

Last week, the Chinese military held its own exercises in the Sea of Japan involving a simulated bomber attack on a naval task force. The potential for a mistake or minor incident provoking a broader conflict was also highlighted last week when three Chinese military aircraft flew briefly into an area covered by overlapping Chinese and South Korean air defence identification zones. The South Korean air force scrambled fighter jets to escort the “intruders” out of the area.

Beijing is concerned that South Korea is not only strengthening military ties with the US but also with Japan. Until recently, Seoul resisted US pressure to coordinate more closely with Japan, given Tokyo’s brutal colonial record on the Korean Peninsula before 1945. The US is keen to integrate both its North Asian allies into military plans, pressing in the first instance for closer intelligence sharing, which is necessary to integrate US anti-ballistic missile systems in Japan and South Korea.

Under Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, encouraged by the US, Japan has moved to remilitarise and take a more aggressive stance against China, not only over the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islets in the East China Sea but throughout the region. The *Japan Times* revealed over the weekend that China had warned Japan not to send its military forces to join provocative “freedom of navigation” operations challenging Chinese territorial

claims in another flashpoint—the South China Sea. Such an action by Japan would constitute a “red line”—in other words, could lead to Chinese retaliation.

Five years after President Barack Obama announced the “pivot to Asia,” Washington’s reckless actions have led to a dangerous heightening of geo-political tensions throughout the Asia Pacific. The worsening of the longstanding confrontation on the Korean Peninsula is just one of the potential triggers for a war involving nuclear-armed powers that could rapidly engulf the region and the world.



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